

GETTING STARTED WITH  
STUDENT CHOICE



JOHN SPENCER



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I want to see kids embrace creativity. As a middle school teacher, this meant mural projects, student-created documentaries, STEM camps, and coding projects. As an entrepreneur, this involved designing a student-centered blogging platform. As a professor this means helping new teachers embrace design thinking in their own practice. As a dad, this has meant elaborate pillow forts and homemade pinball machines and co-writing *Wendell the World's Worst Wizard* with my wife.

I have a crazy belief that all students are naturally creative. I want to see schools unleash the creative potential in all teachers to transform classrooms into bastions of creativity and wonder. I believe that design thinking is a part of the solution. A few years ago, I got the opportunity to share this vision at the White House when I spoke at the Future Ready Summit.

This is passion for creative classrooms is why I blog, why I offer free resources and why I co-wrote the Amazon Best-Selling *Launch: Using Design Thinking to Boost Creativity and Bring Out the Maker in Every Student*.



If you are interested in booking me for keynotes, workshops, or sessions, please email me at [john@spencerauthor.com](mailto:john@spencerauthor.com). You can also tweet me at [@spencerauthor](https://twitter.com/spencerauthor) or find me at my blog at [spencerauthor.com](http://spencerauthor.com).

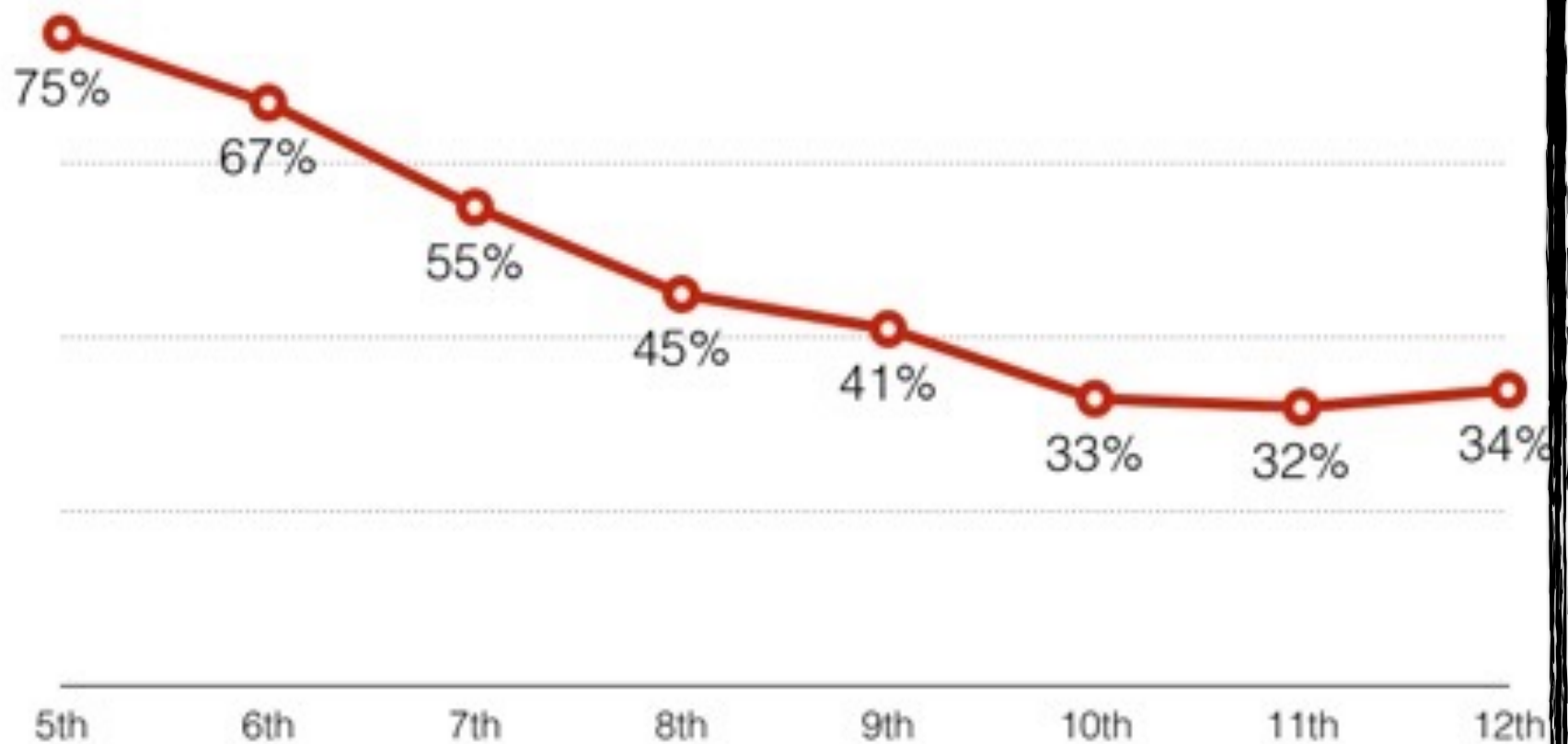
DISCLAIMER:  
I DON'T HAVE  
IT ALL  
FIGURED  
OUT.

I'M STILL ON THIS JOURNEY OF  
STUDENT CHOICE. I STILL TALK  
TOO MUCH IN CLASS. I STILL  
MAKE TOO MANY DECISIONS. I  
STILL HAVE A HARD TIME  
LETTING STUDENTS SELF-  
MANAGE.

BUT I AM  
CONVINCED THAT  
THE ANSWER IS TO  
EMPOWER  
STUDENTS WITH  
MORE VOICE AND  
CHOICE.

DISENGAGEMENT IS  
THE PROBLEM.  
OWNERSHIP IS THE  
ANSWER.

### Percentage of Students Engaged in School, By Grade (n = 928,888)

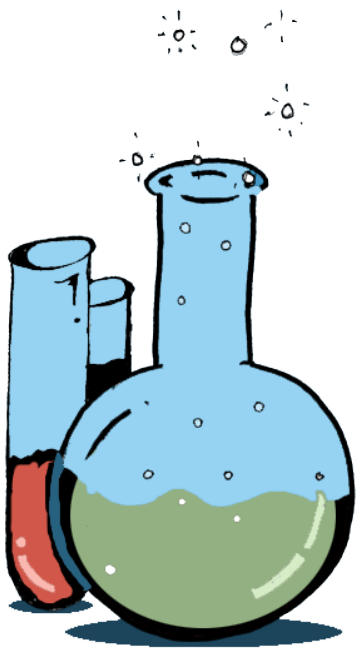


Gallup. (2016). Gallup student poll. Engaged today - Ready for tomorrow. Fall 2015 survey results. Washington, DC: Author.

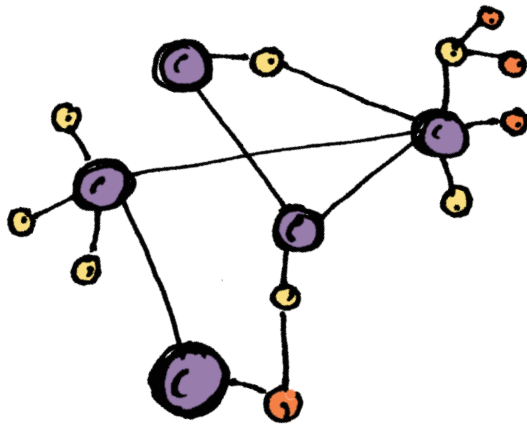
Check out this graph from Scott McLeod's *Dangerously Irrelevant* blog (at [dangerouslyirrelevant.org](http://dangerouslyirrelevant.org)). He does a great job picking apart why student engagement plummets after the fifth grade. The graph is originally from a Gallup poll on student engagement. It's pretty depressing. But it also points to an opportunity we have to solve one of the most pressing problems in K-12 education.

SO, THAT'S A  
VERY REAL  
PROBLEM.

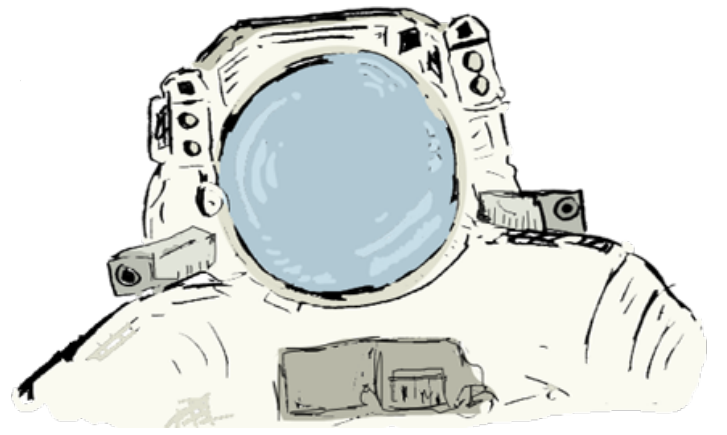
BUT HOW DO  
THINGS CHANGE  
WHEN STUDENTS  
OWN THE  
LEARNING?



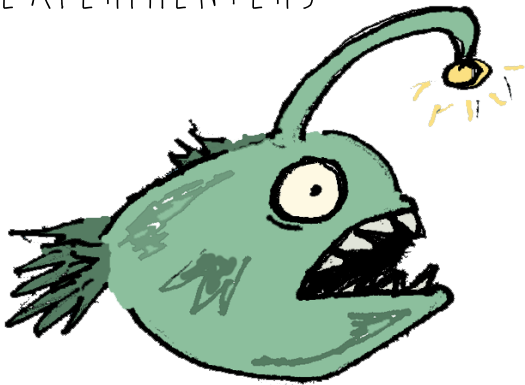
THEY BECOME EXPERIMENTERS



THEY BECOME SYSTEMS THINKERS.



THEY BECOME EXPLORERS, CHASING THINGS THEY FIND INTERESTING



THEY BECOME WILDLY AND UNABASHEDLY DIFFERENT



THEY GET THE CHANCE TO GEEK OUT



THEY LEARN PROJECT MANAGEMENT



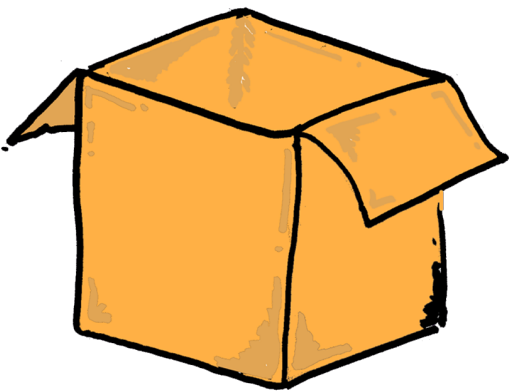
THEY BECOME PROBLEM-SOLVERS



THEY AREN'T AFRAID TO TAKE CREATIVE RISKS AND MAKE MISTAKES.



THEY ARE SELF-DIRECTED



THEY LEARN TO THINK DIVERGENTLY (THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX BY THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE BOX)



THEY BECOME HACKERS AND REBELS



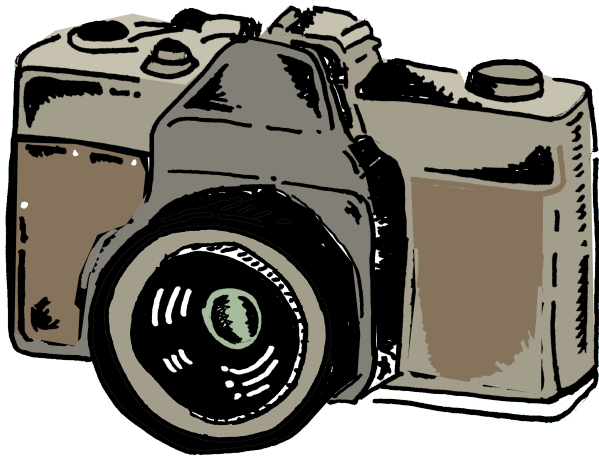
THEY ARE READY FOR THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

IN OTHER WORDS . . .

THEY BECOME  
CRITICAL-THINKING,  
PASSIONATE, LIFE-  
LONG LEARNERS,  
READY TO TACKLE\*  
THE WORLD

\*figuratively, because literally tackling the world would be painful and dangerous

AND THAT'S  
PRETTY AWESOME.



A SNAPSHOT OF  
STUDENT  
OWNERSHIP

As I arrive home from work, I notice a trend. Every room has a project. My oldest son is creating his own sport, designing his own experiments, and trying to create a video game. My middle son is building a world in Minecraft, writing his own graphic novel, and making things with Legos. My daughter is drawing, painting, and building with scraps of cardboard and duct tape. Meanwhile, my wife and I are working on various home improvement projects. We're also working together on a new fiction book. She is doing a solo painting project. I'm working on a tech project.

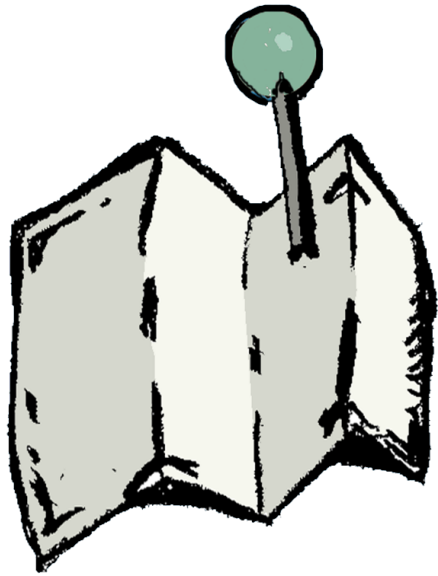
My kids move back and forth between doing individual projects and working together. They shift between consuming and creating. They move between curiosity and creativity. It's a constant ebb and flow.

We're makers, builders, tinkerers, designers. But, more importantly, we're learners. We are always exploring — whether it's a walk outside under the stars or a deep dive into a book or an online search based on some random question we're dying to answer. We are naturally curious and this curiosity fuels our creative projects.

I'm under no illusion that we are somehow special as a family. I believe every person is naturally curious and naturally creative. And when we engage in learning that taps into this curiosity and creativity, we feel more alive. This is part of what it means to be human. This is part of what makes life amazing.

But this requires choice and ownership. This requires a sense of control over what you're doing. And, sadly, this sense of ownership is often missing in classrooms. I'm guilty of this, too. It is way easier to talk about ownership and choice as a dad than it is as a teacher. After all, I have three kids at home and no standardized tests. I'm free to think about learning rather than test scores.

And yet, I still believe it can work in the classroom.

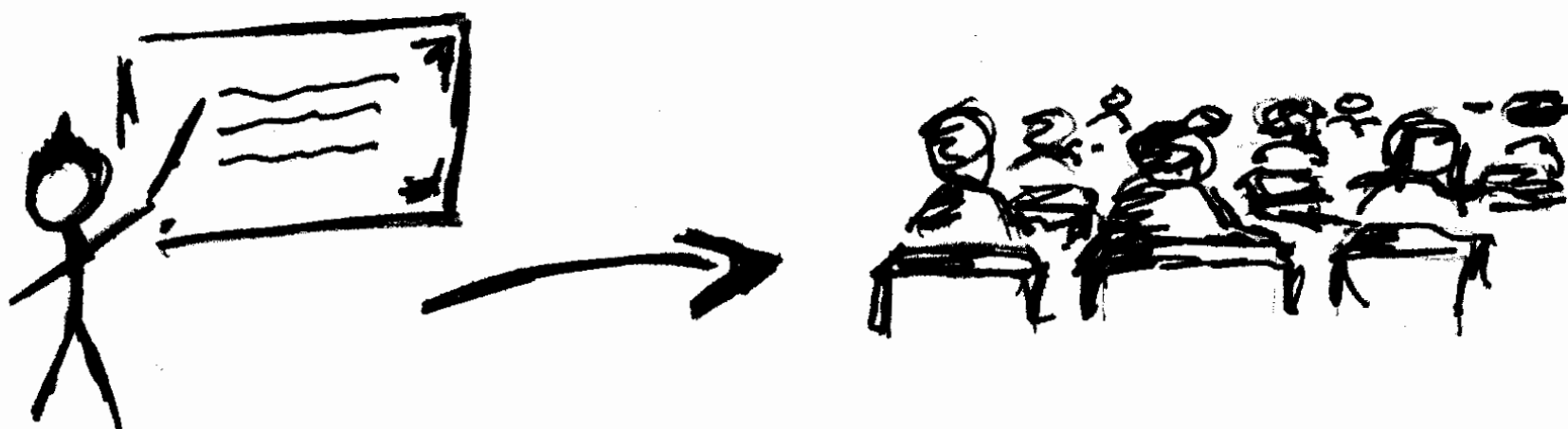


MY JOURNEY  
TOWARD  
STUDENT CHOICE

I still remember the day. I was in my first year of teaching and I sat there holding my printed lesson plan. This was supposed to be my greatest lesson of the school year. I had planned it for hours, revising various aspects of it until it looked flawless. On paper. But now, in third period, it was clear that students weren't engaged.

That's not entirely true. Many of my students were engaged. They were listening, answering discussion questions, and participating. However, there something missing. Students were engaged but they weren't empowered.

At the time, I viewed teaching as a content delivery system. I worked tirelessly to create content that would be meaningful, fun, and challenging. But still, it was always my content and I was always the person delivering it. I used terms like "delivering a lesson" or "creating content." I used words like "covering" and "getting through" when describing topics.



Don't get me wrong. Students completed projects. However, these were culminating projects at the end of content-delivery. These projects didn't resemble the types of projects that people do outside of a classroom. I had strict rules on everything from formatting to topics to style. I handed students instruction manual project sheets where they could walk through the process sequentially. So, while they were physically creating something, they were not engaged in creative thinking. They were following my recipe.

Looking back at it, I realize that these projects had always been about me. Here's what I mean:

**I CHOSE THE TOPIC.  
I CHOSE THE CONTENT.  
I ASKED THE QUESTIONS.  
I WROTE THE INSTRUCTIONS.  
I MANAGED THE PROJECT PROGRESS.  
I CHOSE THE TASKS.  
I WROTE THE OBJECTIVES.  
I PICKED THE STANDARDS.  
I DECIDED ON THE FORMAT.  
I JUDGED THE QUALITY.  
I CHOSE THE AUDIENCE.  
I OWNED THE PROJECT.**

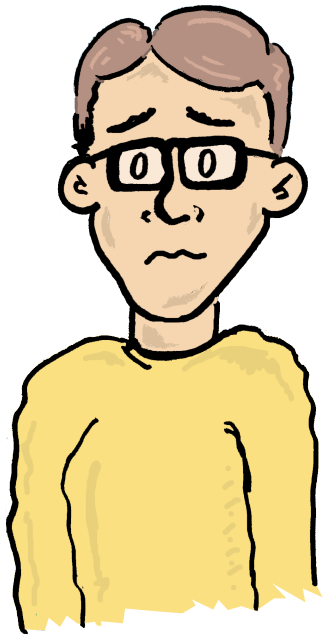
I WAS  
AFRAID.

UNLIKE,  
REALLY  
AFRAID.

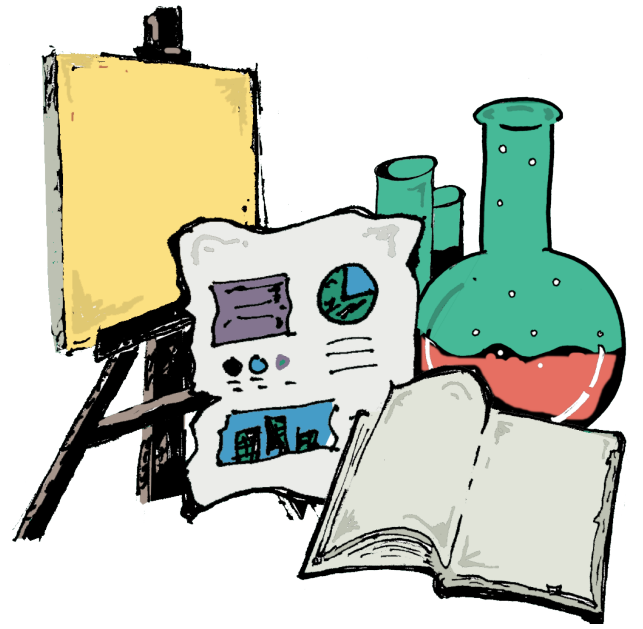
I MEAN,

SUPER-

AFRAID.



I COULDN'T PREDICT  
WHERE WE WERE GOING.



IT MIGHT NOT  
FIT THE STANDARDS

I MIGHT GET IN TROUBLE  
BY THE ADMINISTRATION

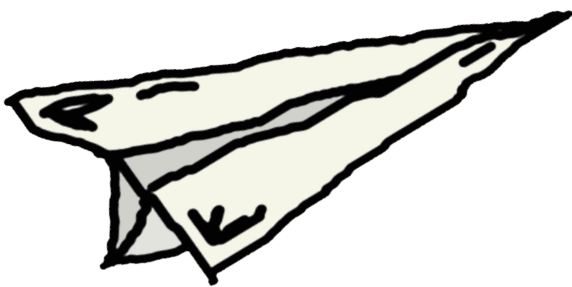
# THESE WERE MY FEARS ...



KIDS WOULD TALK THE WHOLE TIME.



THE CLASSROOM WOULD  
GET CHAOTIC



KIDS MIGHT BE OFF-TASK



IT MIGHT TAKE  
TOO MUCH TIME



I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO  
TRACK HOW EACH KID WAS DOING



STUDENTS MIGHT  
NOT RESPECT ME



IT FELT LIKE A GAMBLE

BUT THEN ALL  
OF THAT  
CHANGED . . . .



THE DOCUMENTARY  
PROJECT

Everything changed when we did our documentary project. I took a chance. I built the unit around the design thinking framework and allowed students to own the process and the finished product. Moreover, I asked them to launch their finished product to a real audience in the form of a video screening night.

## **THEY OWNED EVERYTHING.**

They were making history — literally, by recording interviews, adding their own scripts, finding visuals, and then working collaboratively with other teams to create one larger documentary. It wasn't perfect. I still asserted too much control on the process and our "authentic audience" ended up being just the kids in the classroom. Still, it was the first time I ever used design thinking in the classroom to empower my students to own the entire learning process.

The results were astounding. Students were more frustrated and more afraid than ever before. Kids were in tears when they couldn't get something to work. However, they were also empowered. They were excited. They were passionate.

## **THEY WERE MAKERS.**

I spent the next summer analyzing every part of my classroom with a single, driving question:

WHAT DECISIONS AM I  
MAKING FOR STUDENTS  
THAT THEY COULD MAKE  
FOR THEMSELVES?

I revamped everything — my class rules, procedures, instructional strategies, lesson plans, projects, and assessments.

Everything.

It feels counterintuitive, but when students have more choice, they will actually work harder. They will take more creative risks. They will be more engaged. And that's what happened. When I revamped my approach so that they had the freedom to learn, that's exactly what they did. They learned at a deeper level than ever before.

For years, we've tried to solve the riddle of student engagement. However, I wonder if maybe engagement isn't enough. Maybe it's time we move beyond engagement and start thinking about . . .

OWNERSHIP

When that happens, we shift from engagement to . . .

EMPOWERMENT

OKAY, THIS  
SOUNDS GREAT,  
BUT . . . .

HOW DO I  
ACTUALLY  
DO THIS?



MAYBE IT'S  
TIME WE  
TALK ABOUT  
ICE CREAM.

THAT'S  
RIGHT.

ICE CREAM.

YEP, ICE  
CREAM.

Baskin Robbins offers 31 flavors. The rotation changes each month, so I'm guessing there are probably hundreds if not thousands of flavors that they create. If you're looking for choice, this is place is it. And there's a good chance you'll find something that you like at the store. If you can't, you might want to reconsider your life . . . or at least your love of ice cream.

However, if you are looking for something very specific that nobody in their right mind would offer, you might need to go to Cold Stone Creamery. Here, you can order a hot fudge peanut butter and pretzel ice cream. Nobody else is choosing that flavor. It's yours. There's a good chance you'll get the exact ice cream that you want.

And yet . . .

If you want to own the entire process, you need to go to a frozen yogurt place. I know, I know, it's not really ice cream. It's "yogurt," which is a code word for "ice cream that pretends not to be ice cream." At the fro yo place, you get to decide which flavor you want. There are fewer options than what Baskin Robbins offers. However, you get to decide on the exact amount you want. You also get to choose the toppings, selecting not only which ones you want but how much you want of each topping. You own the entire process.



DID YOU  
CATCH THE  
NOT-SO-  
SUBTLE  
METAPHOR?

# THE 3 APPROACHES TO STUDENT CHOICE

When we talk about choice and differentiation, the conversations often revolve around the Baskin Robbins model. Give kids a choice menu and let them choose. On some level, it works. As the teacher, you get to do quality control on the content and on the process. However, it can feel exhausting to create thirty-one new flavors over and over again.

Sometimes, we shift from differentiated to personalized. This is when the Cold Stone Creamery model kicks in. Here, students move from choice to freedom in the content. Here, they are not selecting from a list of choices but rather stating exactly what they want. There is more agency and ownership. Engagement increases. But the teacher still owns the process and it becomes exhausting.

However, when students own both the content and the process, they shift into the fro yo model. Here, they decide what they want to learn by doing it themselves. They might actually have fewer choices, but they have more freedom and a higher level of autonomy. The teacher is still present as an advisor and an architect of the master system. Yet, students are working in a self-directed way. If Baskin Robbins is differentiation and Cold Stone Creamery is personalization, frozen yogurt is empowerment.

Here's the crazy part: the school system is designed to be vanilla. Most people take the vanilla and shrug their shoulders. But you can start with vanilla and see where your students take it. You don't need to create Cold Stone Creamery. You can turn the class into a fro yo zone.

PRODUCT



BASKIN ROBBINS



- TEACHER-LED
- STUDENT CHOICE

COLD STONE CREAMERY



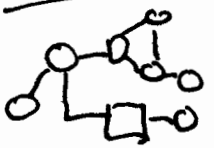
- STUDENT-LED
- STUDENT-CHOICE

FROZEN YOGURT



- STUDENT-LED
- STUDENT CHOICE

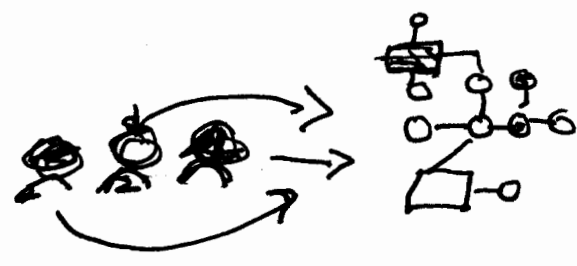
PROCESS



- TEACHER-LED
- No STUDENT CHOICE



- TEACHER-LED
- STUDENT CHOICE

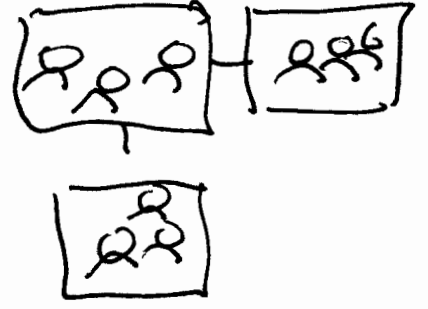


- STUDENT-LED
- STUDENT CHOICE

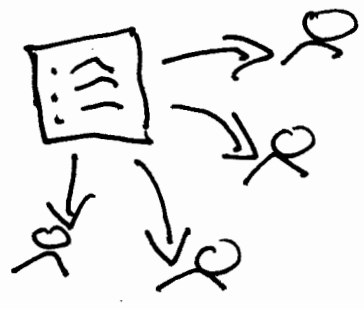
GOAL



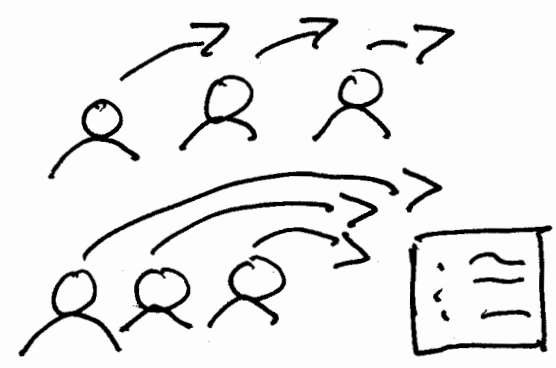
DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION



PERSONALIZED LEARNING



EMPOWERED LEARNERS



Here's a snapshot of the way I sketched it out in my journal.

WHAT DOES A  
FRO-YO  
CLASSROOM  
ACTUALLY  
LOOK LIKE?

10 WAYS TO  
LEVERAGE  
STUDENT CHOICE  
IN YOUR  
CLASSROOM

# #1: LET STUDENTS CHOOSE THE TOPIC.

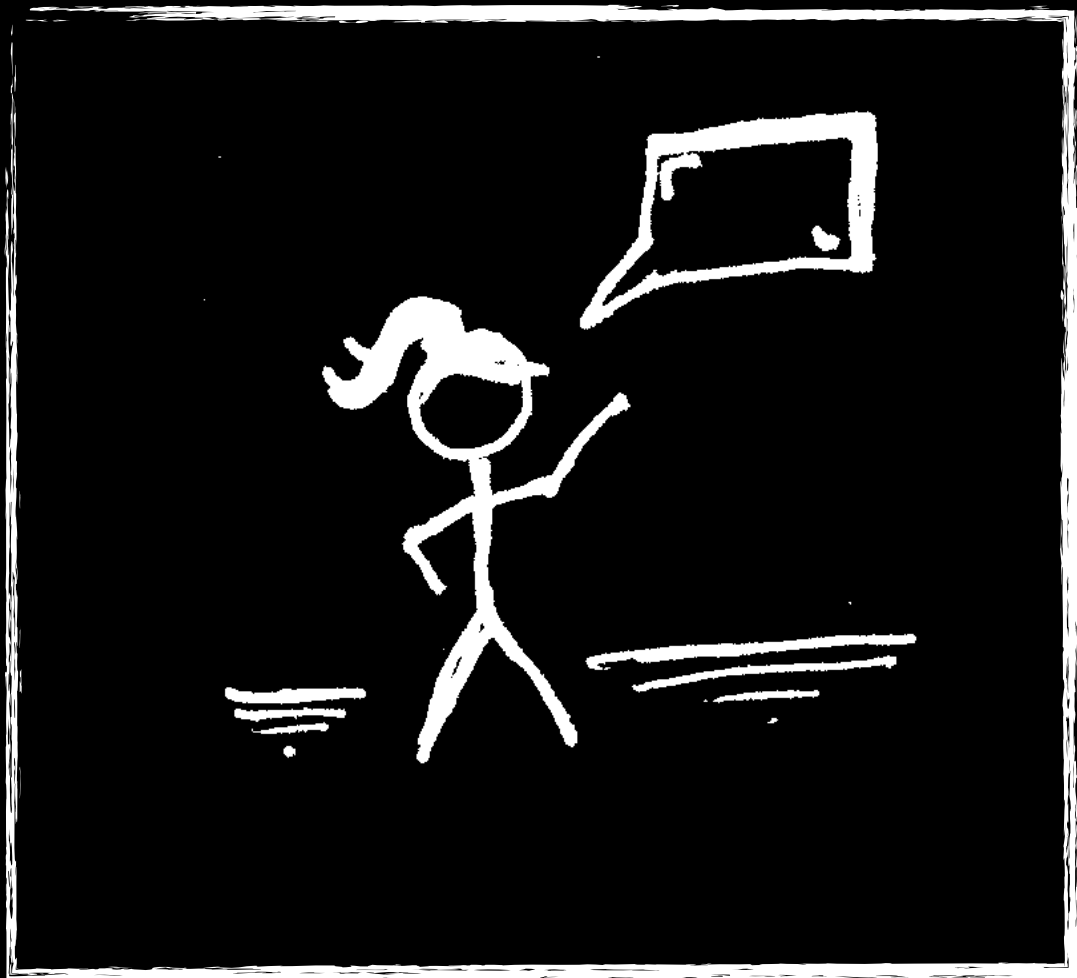
When I first had students blog, I would post a writing prompt on the projector. However, when I had students explore real blogs, they pointed out that in the real world, bloggers write about topics they care about. So, I told them to choose a topic or theme. They could create foodie blogs, sports blogs, gamer blogs, etc. Suddenly blogging didn't feel quite so much like a classroom activity. It felt like a life activity.



LEARNING SHOULD TAP INTO EACH  
STUDENT'S GEEKY INTERESTS.

# #2: LET STUDENTS ASK THE QUESTIONS.

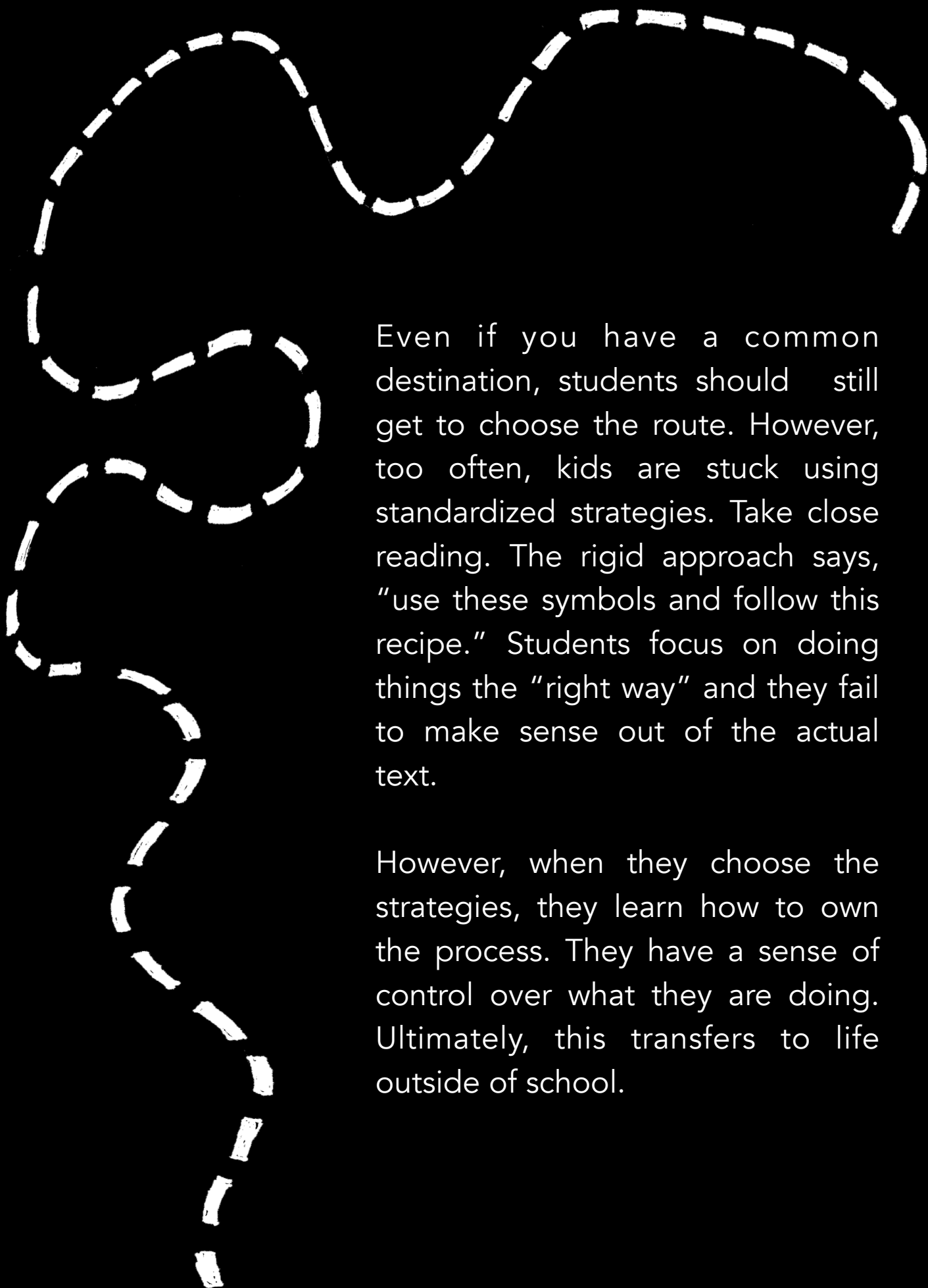
(YES, EVEN THE "STUPID" QUESTIONS\*)



Students should question answers as often as they answer questions. This is why inquiry is such a critical component to student-centered learning. Students need to chase curiosity in a way that fuels their creative thinking. This sense of wonder is often the starting point for deep learning.

\*especially the "stupid" ones because those off-task, random, quirky questions are often the starting point for creativity

# #3: LET STUDENTS CHOOSE THE ROUTE.



Even if you have a common destination, students should still get to choose the route. However, too often, kids are stuck using standardized strategies. Take close reading. The rigid approach says, "use these symbols and follow this recipe." Students focus on doing things the "right way" and they fail to make sense out of the actual text.

However, when they choose the strategies, they learn how to own the process. They have a sense of control over what they are doing. Ultimately, this transfers to life outside of school.

# #4: LET STUDENTS PICK THE MATERIALS AND RESOURCES.

This is one of the cool aspects of design thinking. Students work through an ideation phase and then begin building a prototype. I love the idea that they guide not only the concept of what they will create but they also figure out what materials they will use in order to build their prototype.

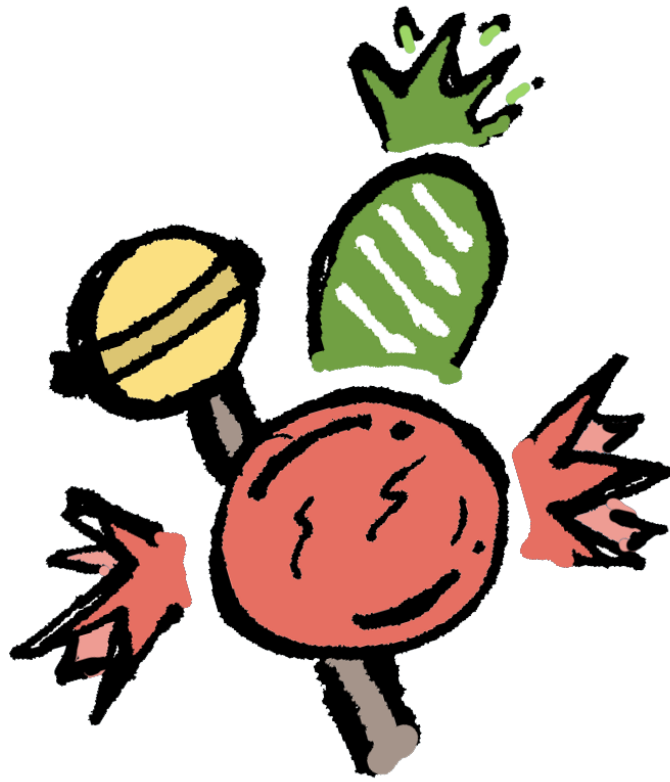
This goes beyond physical products. In digital content, they can choose what applications they will use and what type of media they will work with. When designing an event or a service project, they can determine the venue, the materials, and the resources.



# #5: LET STUDENTS DECIDE THE CONTENT.

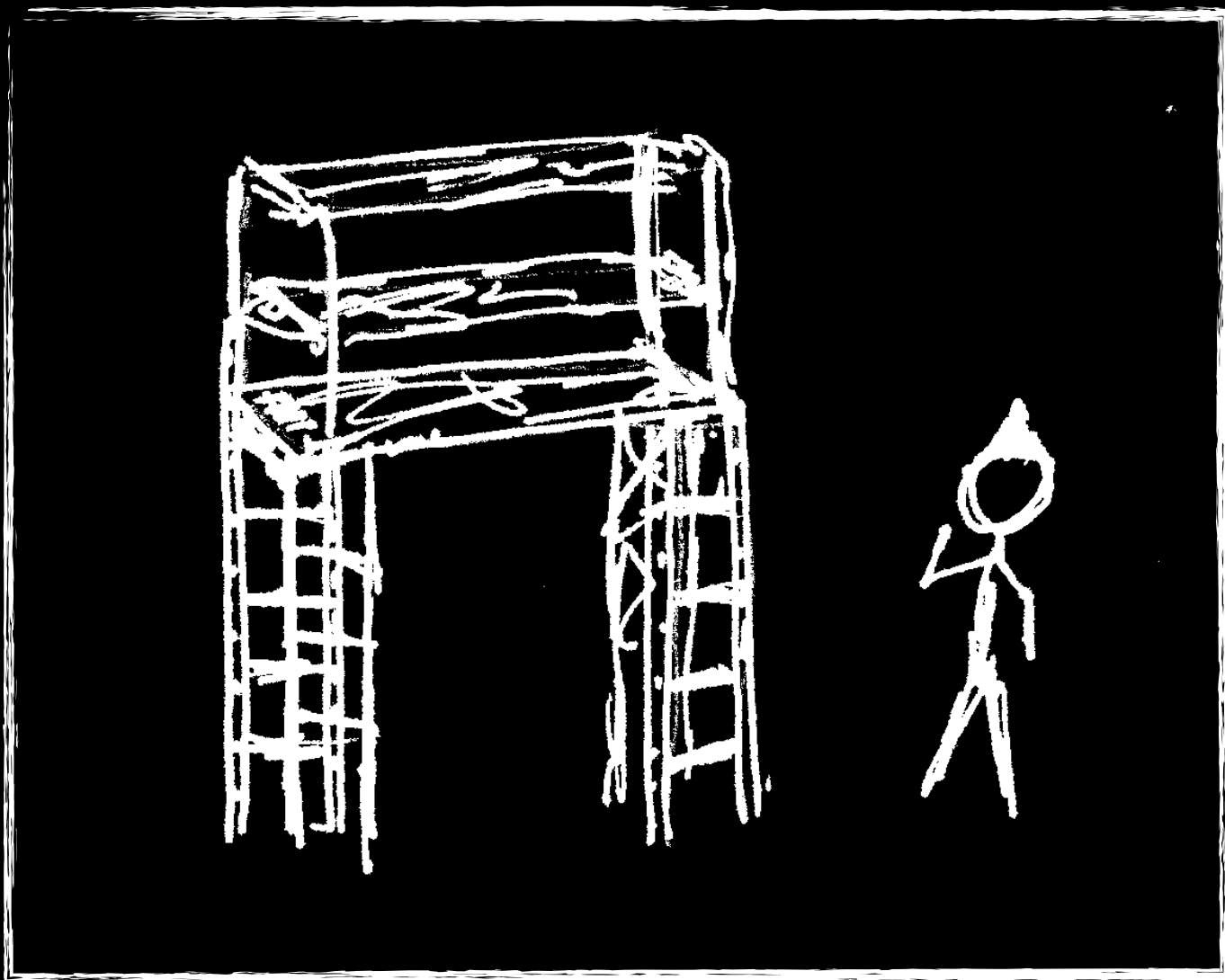


I love sustained silent reading. I get it. It's old school. It won't make the list of trendy new maker space learning. However, it works. A few years ago, I taught 8th grade self-contained. The school librarian and the upper grade teachers had cultivated this love of silent reading. So, when we went to the library, it was like going to a candy store.



WHEN KIDS GET TO CHOOSE  
WHAT THEY ARE READING,  
A LIBRARY CAN  
FEEL LIKE A CANDY STORE.

# #6: LET STUDENTS CHOOSE THE SCAFFOLDING.

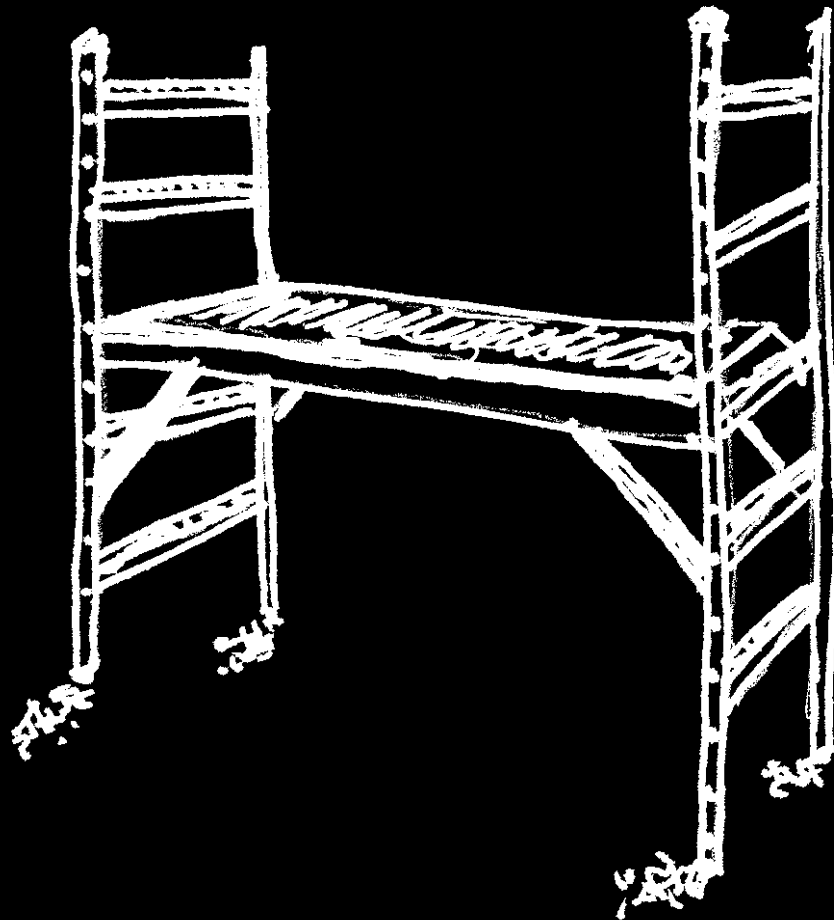


I remember requiring students to use a set of scaffolding for the research process. A handful of students loved it because they needed it.

The rest of them hated it. What I had designed as a scaffold felt more like a cage. I had the best of intentions, but they felt stuck when they *had* to use the scaffolding I required.

I should have treated the scaffolding as an optional resource that they could access when they found it necessary.

WHAT I WANTED TO GIVE STUDENTS:



WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO THEM:





WHAT IF SCAFFOLDING FELT MORE  
LIKE A TOOL BELT THAT STUDENTS  
COULD ACCESS AT ANY TIME?

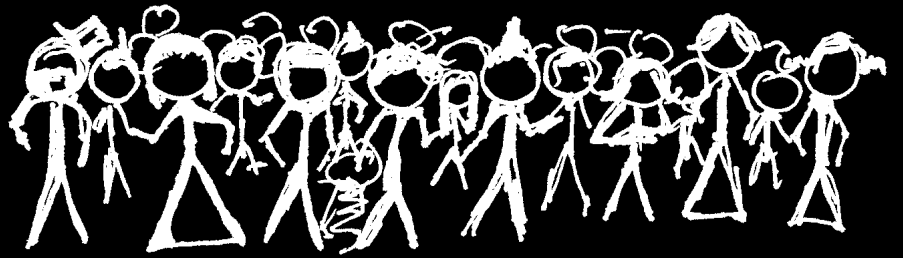
# #7: LET STUDENTS CHOOSE THE FORMAT.



for their creative work. It might be a video, a podcast, or a blog post.

# #8: LET STUDENTS CHOOSE THE AUDIENCE.

When students define the audience, they are able to clarify what they are doing and how they are going to do it. This honors student agency while also teaching students how to gain empathy toward a specific audience.



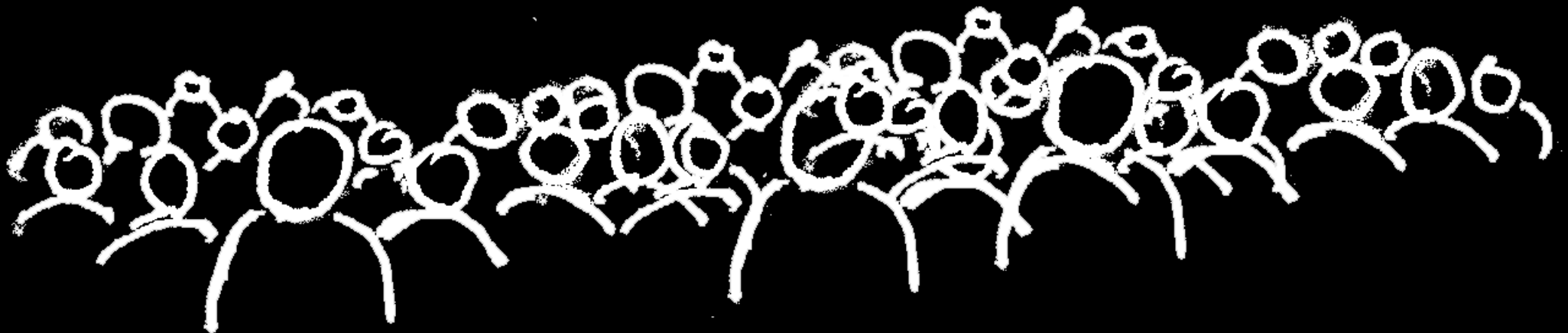
LOCAL AUDIENCE



CITY AUDIENCE



GLOBAL AUDIENCE



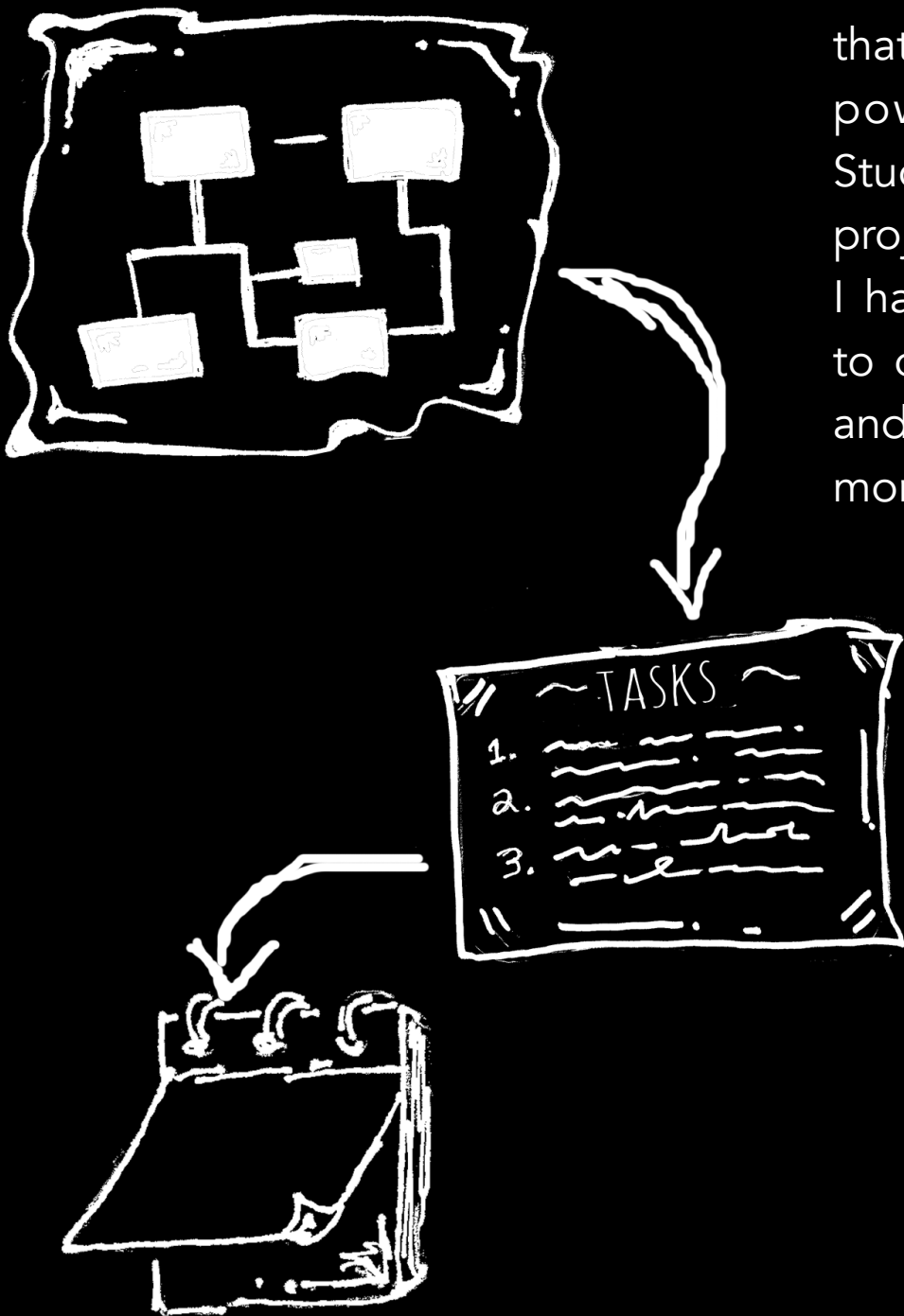
# #9: LET STUDENTS WORK AT THEIR OWN PACE



Imagine a P.E. class where every student had to run, lockstep, at the exact same pace. However, this is often the mindset we have with students when we do math facts or reading fluency. What if we allowed students to set their own pace for learning?

# #10: LET STUDENTS MANAGE THEIR OWN PROJECTS

This was the hardest thing for me to let go of. However, I believe that project management is a powerful, transferrable skill. Students need to learn the art of project management. Over time, I have learned to allow students to own the project management and to build their own systems to monitor their progress.



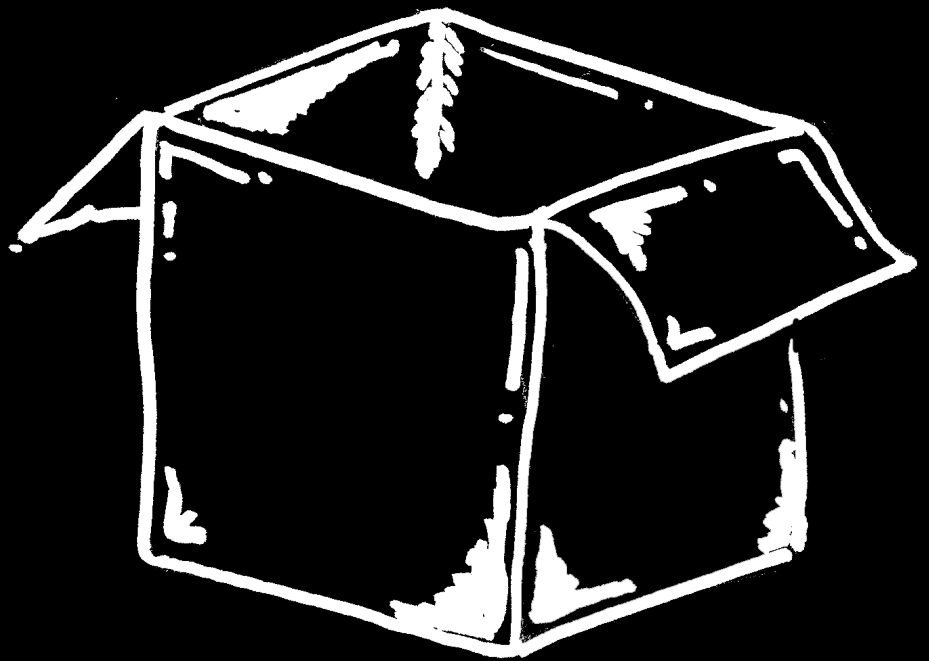
WHERE DO  
YOU GET  
STARTED?

# #1: START WITH JUST ONE PROJECT.

It can feel overwhelming to completely overhaul your pedagogical approach. It takes time to develop the systems and structures for things like student-selected intervention and enrichment or student self-assessments. Besides, there are tons of great lessons that aren't choice-driven and you don't want to abandon everything. For me, it has been a decade-long shift into a choice-driven classroom and I'm still continuing to evolve.

This why it helps to start out with one choice-driven project. This allows you to spend some time planning and reflecting while also spending time teaching in a way that feels comfortable. It might be a two-week unit that you try out.

In the next few pages, we'll be exploring some of the projects you can use as a starting point to student choice.





NEVER FORGET  
TO EMBRACE  
WONDER

## WONDER WEEK

The Wonder Week Project is an inquiry-based , week-long project, where students ask questions about anything they find interesting. These are those nagging questions they have that they've never had a chance to answer in school. Next, they engage in research about that topic before eventually creating a short multimedia presentation. Some students do podcasts (like a CurocityCast) and others choose a blog post or a video. They get to decide on the format.



## GENIUS HOUR

If you want to go fully independent and long-term, you can try a Genius Hour project. Here students spend an allotted time each week working independently on a project that they design from the ground up.

Genius Hour is an innovative approach to choice, inspired by Google's 20% Time that they offer employees. The idea is that one day a week, employees at Google get to work on passion projects. These independent projects have led to some of the best innovations that Google has seen (although many in the company are saying that with a newer emphasis on the bottom line, the idea of 20% Time is fading).

This might be hard to pull off in a classroom, but it's possible. Students can plan and manage their own independent projects. Some students will work alone while others work collaboratively. Some of the projects begin with questions and research while others start with students learning how to do something creative for the first time. It's meant to be flexible.

My good friend AJ Juliani wrote a guest post about Genius Hour on my blog: <http://www.spencerauthor.com/2016/08/10-reasons-to-pilot-genius-hour-this-year.html/>

# GEEK OUT BLOGS

I used to begin the school year with a “get to know you” project called History of Me, where students would share their personal story with the class. I soon realized that this brought up unforeseen trauma and that some students really wanted to escape aspects of their past (students who had fled as refugees from war-torn nations or had experienced abuse in their families).

That’s when I switched to the Geek Out Blogs.

The idea is simple. Students write topical or thematic blogs not the topics that they geek out about. We go over examples of blogs (which exposes students to high-interest non-fiction reading) and they look at trends. They

see foodie blogs, skateboarding blogs, sports blogs, fashion blogs, gaming blogs, car blogs, history blogs, science blogs, etc.



Next, they create a specific themed blog. They define the driving interest as well as the audience. From there, they begin writing blog posts in various formats:

- They choose the format, including video, audio, and text
- They choose the topics of the posts
- They engage in research and share their findings with the classmates
- They create posts that range from listicals (“Ten Surprising Facts About the History of Skateboarding” or “The Top Five Fantasy Novels of the Last Decade.”) to Q+A to interviews to human interest stories to persuasive pieces to instructions on how to do something.

With Geek Out Blogs, students get to own the entire writing process, from finding a topic and an audience all the way into research, writing, editing, and publishing. They get to choose the format and the genre of each post. And ultimately, they get to be the experts.

# DESIGN THINKING PROJECTS

If you prefer having students work interdependently with structured creativity, you might want to go with a design thinking project. Design thinking is a flexible framework designed to get the most out of the creative process. It's used in a diverse range of industries: in the corporate world, in social and civic spaces, and in higher education.

A.J. Juliani and I developed the student-friendly LAUNCH Cycle:

Phase One: Look, Listen, and Learn

Phase Two: Ask Tons of Questions

Phase Three: Understand the Process or Problem

Phase Four: Navigate Ideas

Phase Five: Create a Prototype

Phase Six: Highlight and Fix

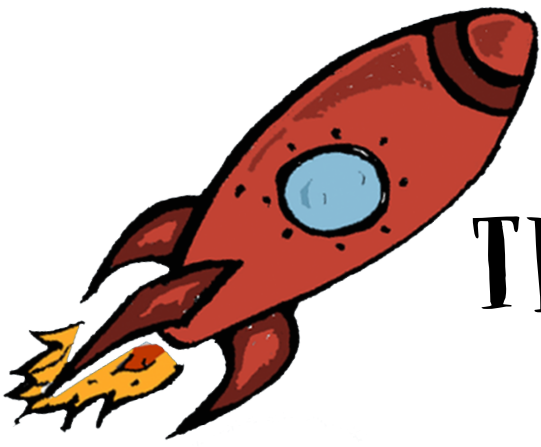
Phase Seven: Launch to the World!

Design thinking is more structured than some of the other approaches to student choice. However, students still have a great deal of agency and autonomy. The structure enhances rather than inhibits student voice and choice.

## GET THE TOOLKIT

If you're interested in using design thinking, I created a toolkit that includes the free eBook *Getting Started with Design Thinking* and a free design thinking Maker Project that includes the video, the curriculum, the slideshow, and an interactive notebook for students.





# THE LAUNCH CYCLE

## **L: LOOK, LISTEN, AND LEARN**

In the first phase, students look, listen, and learn. The goal here is awareness. It might be a sense of wonder at a process or an awareness of a problem or a sense of empathy toward an audience.

## **A: ASK TONS OF QUESTIONS**

Sparked by curiosity, students move to the second phase, where they ask tons of questions.

## **U: UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OR PROBLEM**

This leads to understanding the process or problem through an authentic research experience. They might conduct interviews or needs assessments, research articles, watch videos, or analyze data.

## **N: NAVIGATE IDEAS**

Students apply that newly acquired knowledge to potential solutions. In this phase, they navigate ideas. Here they not only brainstorm, but they also analyze ideas, combine ideas, and generate a concept for what they will create.

## **C: CREATE A PROTOTYPE**

In this next phase, they create a prototype. It might be a digital work or a tangible product, a work of art or something they engineer. It might even be an action or an event or a system.

## **H: HIGHLIGHT AND FIX**

Next, they begin to highlight what's working and fix what's failing. The goal here is to view this revision process as an experiment full of iterations, where every mistake takes them closer to success.

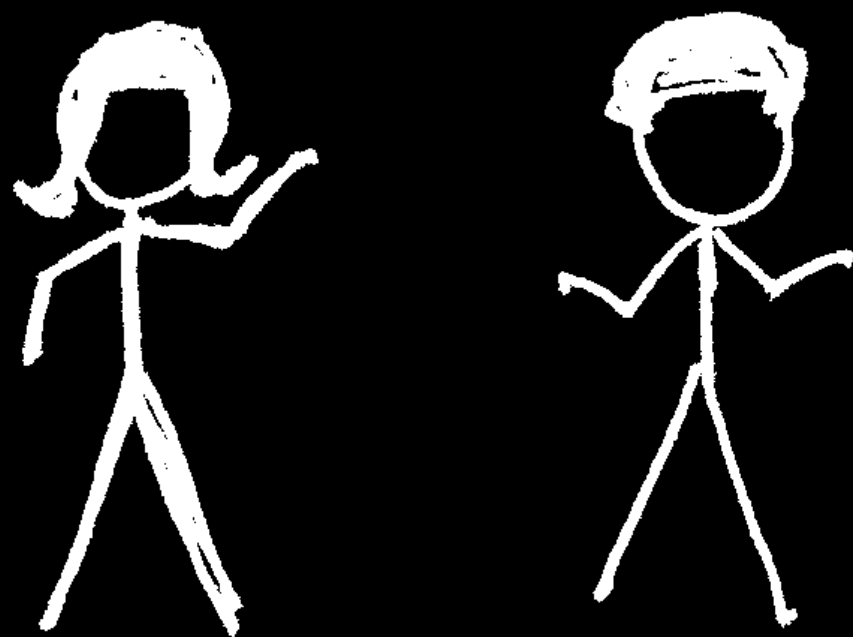
## **LAUNCH TO AN AUDIENCE**

Then, when it's done, it's ready to launch. In the launch phase, they send it to an authentic audience. They share their work with the world!

## #2: COLLABORATE WITH A TRUSTED COLLEAGUE

When I first started shifting toward a choice-driven classroom, I felt alone. I became risk-averse because I didn't want to look like the "odd one out." I made huge mistakes and I had no one to share my frustrations with, because I knew I would hear things like, "you were too idealistic" or "maybe kids shouldn't have so much choice in their learning" or even "too much choice will make kids selfish."

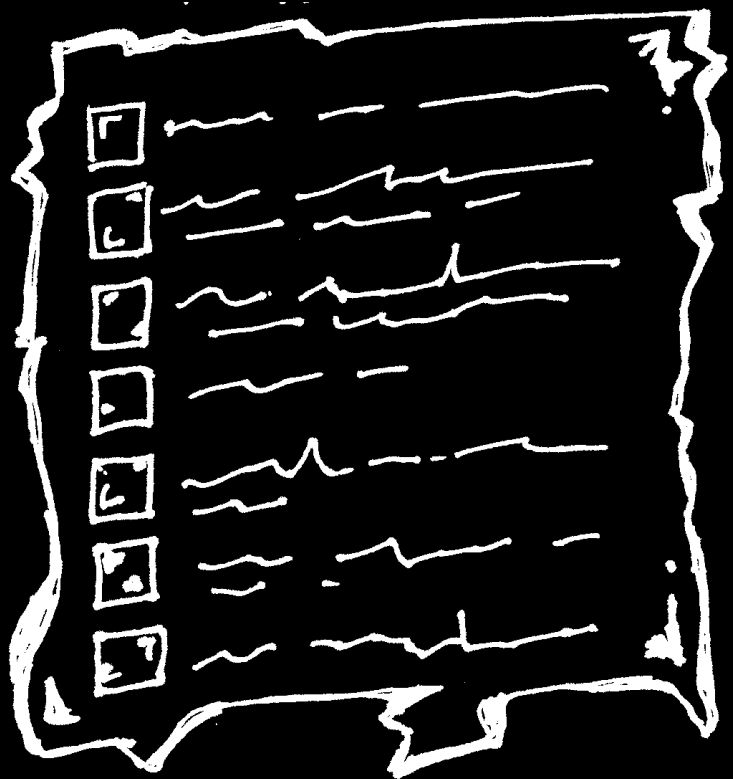
However, in my second year in this shift, I met a new teacher named Javier. He and I became close friends and trusted colleagues. We regularly shared what worked and what failed. We were able to be vulnerable. And slowly, we started collaborating on projects. It was easier to take creative risks when I wasn't alone.

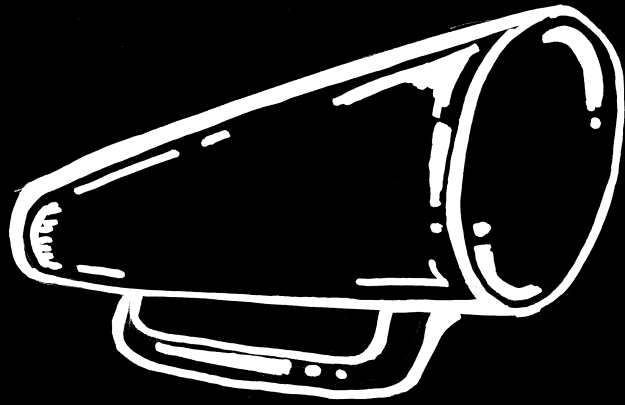


# #3: DO A CHOICE AUDIT OF YOUR CLASSROOM

I mentioned this before, but it can help to do an audit of every classroom procedure with the driving question, "What am I doing for students that they could do on their own?" This not only empowers students but it also frees up the teacher to spend less time working as a mid-level manager and more time as an instructional leader.

It can help to close your eyes and imagine yourself as a student. Go through the entire class period or school day in your classroom and imagine what you, as a student, would want to do on your own. This sense of empathy can be eye-opening. When I did this, I realized that most of the class procedures had been designed to make things easier for me, as the teacher. They weren't oriented around students. However, when students owned more of the process, things actually became more organized and less chaotic, because students weren't having to figure out how to comply with an external system.





## #4: COMMUNICATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS\*

Sometimes student choice can seem like negligence to parents or to principals. You can appear as the “fun teacher” to is “letting kids get away with everything.” I remember the sting of hearing a student say to another teacher, “That’s Mr. Spencer. We can learn whatever we want in his class.”

I realized that I needed to share why we were embracing student choice as a class. So, I talked to students about choice and ownership. I shared data with parents about how student choice could increase motivation and engagement. I wanted people to understand that this wasn’t simply an issue of letting kids do whatever they felt like doing. We still had structures and rules and expectations.

This is why I love the word “pilot.” Seriously. Go try it out. Leaders love it. Say something like, “I’m going to pilot Genius Hour projects.” Or say, “We will be piloting the use design thinking, a framework used in the arts, in business, and in engineering.” Share that with your administrators and with your parents. Chances are they’ll see choice as more than just letting go and having fun.

\*not to be confused with steak-holders, which is totally different.

## #5: MODEL IT

This was the hardest part for me to get. After a few years of designing structures for choice, I had to remind myself that students weren't used to the sheer amount of choice we had. I had to teach students how to select the right intervention and enrichment, how to access the scaffolding, how to manage their own projects, and how to make decisions when they felt stuck. I had to provide sentence frames for inquiry questions. I still needed to walk through our first design thinking project in a sequential, step-by-step way that required a little more direct instruction.

At first this felt like I a copout or a compromise. A "real" choice-driven classroom wouldn't need so much initial support from a teacher. And yet, gradual release makes sense. When you're learning a skill for the first time, chances are you watch tons of videos. You copy other people. You listen to experts. You are risk-averse. You wonder if you're doing it right.

The same is true of students who are owning their learning for the first time. They need a vision for how it can look and you, as the teacher, can provide that to them by modeling. Sometimes you will have to give permission when you assume they already know it. Sometimes you will have to model the metacognition needed in self-assessment. Sometimes you need to model the decision-making process. It's okay if there's some direct instruction in these early stages of student choice. Students need to see what it looks like in action.



TAKE THE LEAP!